



Just Another Boondoggle?

The MC4 Offsite Experience

Alvin Lee

Software engineers, administrative staff, and logisticians stare intently at a sticker-laden board, agonizing over which square to reveal next. Like the teams around them, the group seems transfixed, as if trying to will each opaque square into revealing what lies beneath. Is it a sought-after dot? Or will the choice cost them when a blank square is revealed?

It is the second day of a three-day strategic planning meeting away from military grounds—often dubbed an “offsite.”

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Organizations can have difficulty in justifying offsites. Rising costs, fewer people, and increasing demands on workers' schedules are making a single afternoon away from the cubicle, much less an extended work trip, appear wasteful. Are offsites headed for extinction? Can the cost in time, effort, and funds be justified any longer?

Recently, Defense Acquisition University instructors were given the opportunity to contribute to and participate in an offsite for the Medical Communications for Combat Casualty Care, DoD's battlefield medical recording program. Team-building exercises that promote creative thinking and collaboration are a hallmark of the university, and DAU instructors work with offsite programs like MC4's to mix learning and fun together, while teaching skills that enhance team performance. During the exercise described in this article, MC4 participants increased their collaboration and problem-solving skills in a challenging live-action simulation.

Because DAU participated in the event, I had the chance to talk with Army Lt. Col. Edward Clayson, former MC4 commander and product manager. He shared his perspectives on leadership and the use of offsites as tools for ensuring future success.

The Challenge

The team debates: to pull or not to pull? Each team member has unique information, and success depends on decisions that integrate each person's specialized knowledge. It seems like it should be easy, but the limits imposed by the simulation are proving formidable.

When Clayson assumed command of MC4 in 2005, he took over a rapidly expanding organization. The MC4 program was quickly growing from its Operation Iraqi Freedom-focused roots to a worldwide system. A suite of hardware and software components that provides an integrated medical information management system for Service personnel, MC4 has surged from an Army-only system to one used by all the Services.

"The program has grown tremendously over the last three years," Clayson said. Since 2005, MC4 expanded its Iraq-only efforts to include Afghanistan,



Europe, and Egypt; and the program is now used in 13 countries as a result of the Air Force's adoption of the system. Clayson expressed pride in the program's accomplishments, but admitted the workload his people had taken on came with a price.

"We had a lot of people who were well-trained, knew what they were doing, but morale wasn't necessarily as high as it could be," Clayson said. "We needed to do some teambuilding exercises and some morale building, [and to build] some *esprit de corps* to become a highly functional, highly effective organization."

The Response

The discussion continues, and idea by idea, a strategy begins to take shape.

Faced with those and other challenges, Clayson put together his plan of action, which strove to improve:

- Situational leadership
- Recognition
- Teambuilding
- Communication.

One tool for implementing his plan was the yearly MC4 offsite. His goals for the event were well-aligned with his vision and strategic plan:

- Recognize people in front of their peers
- Create an opportunity for people to interact in a social environment
- Get people to know each other better socially as well as professionally.

An MC4 offsite typically spans three days. It begins with a "State of MC4" address by the product manager, which lays out the accomplishments of the program over the past year. This is followed by briefings from each site and functional lead (departments), and updates to the entire organization on team and individual accomplishments. On the second day, team training and teambuilding take place, each year with a different focus tied to the year's goals. The offsite closes with an awards ceremony, celebrating the accomplishments program's team and individual accomplishments. MC4 plans

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Former MC4 commander and product manager

social activities after hours to bring people together, varying from the standard group dinner to more creative, shared events specific to the venue.

"At the Gettysburg battlefield offsite two years ago, we had an opportunity to do a battlefield tour," Clayson said. "That provided the opportunity to break the ice, to get to know each other, to see each other in a social setting. As a result, it made it easier to pick up that phone or send that e-mail message to someone who you can put a face to, you have knowledge of, and to someone who you can tell a joke to and know that that joke will be well-received."

Building camaraderie can also be accomplished through recognition. Even if they can't attend the offsite, members are still recognized during MC4's awards ceremony, with site leads accepting honors on a colleague's behalf. Clayson makes it a point to include recognition in his frequent visits to regional sites for those who are unable to drift far from their post.

"I've done a lot of travel in this job," Clayson admitted. "I've traveled to all the sites, been to every level three hospital in the Central Command—all of the sites where we've had folks stationed. I do take the time out to recognize people, oftentimes reading letters from their supported customers in front of their colleagues."

Planning the Offsite

The team looks at the board again, though this time with anticipation. Where once there was trepidation over a single square, there is now confidence in an overall plan covering dozens of squares. They reach for the first sticker.

Planning the offsite takes four months and starts like any new project—with a consideration for cost, schedule, and performance. Well before the event, a small team within MC4 researches requirements such as lodging, facilities, meeting and training objectives, available funding, and personnel schedules to determine constraints on locations and dates. The team evaluates three different sites, then identifies the costs, locations, facilities and events. Whichever provides the best value is selected as a winner. With a small team taking care of the logistics of the offsite ahead of time, participants can fully concentrate on the objectives of the offsite without worrying about the details.



What has this investment in time and money brought to the program? Over the past three years, the organization has seen an increase in morale and productivity.

Because the mission always comes first, attendance at the offsite remains voluntary. Despite the expanding demands of the MC4 staff, the team's success in planning productive, interesting, and fun offsites has resulted in a voluntary attendance figure of 70 to 80 people each year—about a third of the entire organization's civilian, military, and contractor personnel. Even the offsite's after-hours activities, which are paid for by the participant, are well-attended.

The Bottom Line

A dot! Then another! The team cheers as dot after dot is revealed, a direct product of their team's successful collaboration.

What has this investment in time and money brought to the program? Over the past three years, the organization has seen an increase in morale and productivity—something MC4 representatives attribute to their active recognition program. Communications have improved as well, with departments engaging one another to resolve issues. Team-building activities have inspired real-life improvements, such as the launch of a program-wide Lean Six Sigma effort.

Clayson described an even more dramatic payoff: "We had some particular challenges in personnel turnover because a lot of our workforce is required to deploy to Southwest Asia and spend six months [there]. Even when they come back, they're often on the road, away from their families, at other military bases, training units that are about to deploy in the next rotation. So getting these folks together, letting them know they're appreciated, that what they've accomplished is a huge contribution to the organization, have helped to retain personnel. Turnover has reduced dramatically."

For MC4, the offsite has proven to be a valuable leadership tool. As with any program, the benefits of an offsite increase proportionately with the amount of thought and planning done beforehand. While it is not a universal panacea for all of a program office's problems, the offsite remains a valuable tool for the successful program manager.

At dinner that night, the participants regale one another with how well—and poorly—they did. Amidst the laughter, the lessons of the simulation are reviewed.

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